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SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER HOPEFULS DISCUSS OPCON, NORTH  
KOREA, SUMMITS

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a relaxed January 10 lunch with the Ambassador, National Assembly member and chief of the Presidential Transition Committee's foreign affairs team Park Jin and Lee Myung-bak adviser and former Ambassador to both Kenya and Ireland Kwon Jong-rak discussed OPCON transfer, North Korea, and the timing of a presidential visit to the United States. Park and Kwon clarified the transition team's stance on OPCON, saying the current agreement would be respected, though the new administration might want to revise the timetable if the security situation changed or if ROK forces were significantly behind in improving capabilities. The transition team as a whole seems deeply skeptical that North Korea will give up its nuclear program, and Kwon argued for a stronger U.S.-ROK response to Pyongyang's delay in providing a full declaration of its nuclear programs. Though Park and Kwon do not have the final word on issues like OPCON and North Korea policy, their role in the transition committee suggests their comments both reflect and influence Lee Myung-bak's policy preferences. End Summary.

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OPCON Transfer  
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12. (C) Park Jin and Kwon Jong-rak, key members of President-elect Lee Myung-bak's transition team, reconfirmed that, despite recent press stories, the president-elect does not plan to reopen or hope to renegotiate the agreement between SecDef Gates and Defense Minister Kim Jang-soo that would transfer wartime operational control to the ROK on April 17, 2012. While they wished the decision had come out differently (and they objected strongly to Roh Moo-Hyun's assertions that this was about recovering "sovereignty"), the new administration would "respect" the decision and support its continued implementation. Park and Kwon said they have been trying to tell the press that in the event the security situation changed significantly in a few years (e.g. if the North Korean nuclear threat remained) or if the South Korean military was not ready for the transfer, then they would reserve the option to consult with the United States on a change to the timetable for the transfer.

13. (C) The transition team is also reviewing the ROK's Defense 2020 plan, which was formulated before the OPCON transfer decision. Specifically, they may seek new legislation that would raise the ceiling on the future size

of the armed forces from 500,000 to 550,000 (in the case of the Army, from 370,000 to 400,000) so that the ROK military would be better equipped to handle wartime OPCON.

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Response to North Korea's Delay  
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¶4. (SBU) On North Korea's delayed submission of its nuclear declaration, Kwon said the DPRK was testing "us" (i.e., the U.S. and ROK) to see if we were serious about denuclearization. If we show weakness, they will make things more difficult, and right now we are not being tough enough. Kwon said we should express our disappointment with the delay and take a more principled position. Park Jin took a less emphatic stance and said that, as long as the U.S. and South Korea were aligned, we presented a strong front. Kwon said that since the real problem seemed to be with the North Korean military, we should consider U.S.-North Korea military-to-military talks.

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Visit Timing  
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¶5. (SBU) Park Jin was hopeful that a visit to Camp David might be possible during Lee Myung-bak's (as yet unscheduled) first presidential trip to the U.S. He said an early date in March for that trip would be difficult but possible, though other interlocutors have said the trip was unlikely before the April 9 National Assembly election. The biggest concern, Kwon said, was the optics of such a trip in advance of the April election -- i.e., that a trip so soon after inauguration would make Lee Myung-bak look like he was

pandering to the U.S. Kwon said he had commissioned an internal poll within the Grand National Party (GNP) to gauge party members' approval of an early visit. Kwon's hope was that an early visit would provide enough time between the summit in Washington and the July G-8 Summit in Japan to make it possible for President Bush to visit Korea after attending the G-8.

¶6. (SBU) Park Jin said that Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Shotaro Yachi was in Seoul on January 9 and confirmed that Prime Minister Fukuda had accepted the invitation to attend Lee Myung-bak's inauguration on February 25, at which time Lee will have his first Korea-Japan Summit. Yachi also invited Lee to visit Japan on his way back from the U.S. Kwon and Park were in favor of this suggestion and said such a trip would highlight the importance the next administration plans to place on trilateral (U.S.-ROK-Japan) cooperation. Kwon and Park seemed to be planning ahead for a resumption of semi-annual Korea-Japan summits.

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Ministerial Nominations  
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¶7. (SBU) Lee will start announcing ministerial nominees around January 24, according to Kwon. The short lists for each position will be finalized by early in the week of January 14, but it will take two weeks to screen the candidates. Although the names seem to change daily, Park and Kwon said the frontrunners for the prime minister position were former Foreign Minister Han Sung-joo, Dong-a Ilbo President Kim Hak-jun, Transition Committee Chair Lee Kyung-sook, and former Hanguk University for Foreign Studies President Ahn Byung-man. Kwon speculated that the next prime minister would not be a woman, ruling out Lee Kyung-sook. Park Jin commented that this was Kwon's personal opinion. (Lee separately told the Ambassador that, after the transition, she intended to return to her post as President of Sookmyung Women's University, at least for now.)

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Constitutional Revision  
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¶18. (SBU) Kwon said constitutional revision was likely to come up during Lee Myung-bak's presidency. The most likely revision would be to change to two, four-year presidential terms instead of the current limit of one, five-year term. Kwon said this would not affect Lee Myung-bak's term. Also, the prime minister might be changed to a vice-president, who would work more closely with the president. Park Jin noted that presidents are so isolated in the Blue House that they tend to become imperial during their tenure. They predicted that since Lee is a "man of action," he will want to frequently be out among the people rather than sequestered in the Blue House.

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Bio Notes  
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¶19. (SBU) Park Jin recalled that he was in New York City on September 11, 2001. He was supposed to be sworn in to the New York bar that day, but was sworn in a week later instead. Park names traditional Korean archery as his hobby, and every Sunday practices near Sajik Park at one of the oldest archery ranges in Korea.

¶10. (SBU) Lee Myung-bak allegedly runs an hour a day, though rumor has it that is actually not true. He does play tennis for 3-4 hours on Sundays and likes to golf.

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Comment  
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¶11. (C) Park Jin has taken on a high-profile role within the transition team and is very likely to be offered the foreign minister position. Whether or not he takes it remains to be seen; he recently told the Ambassador and A/S Hill that his heart says to take the foreign minister job but his head tells him to run for reelection in April. Either way, this

late-comer to the Lee camp (he did not have a significant role until October) is likely to be foreign minister at some point during Lee Myung-bak's presidency if Park can overcome his tendency to seek the media limelight, something many close to Lee say the president-elect does not like.

¶12. (C) Kwon's future is less clear. He is struggling to articulate a distinct position within the transition team and vault himself above other more thoughtful advisers. Kwon appears to be hoping to parlay the fact that he shares the president-elect's hometown of Pohang and his distinctly conservative line into greater influence with Lee. For now, this career diplomat is listed by many as a top candidate for either national security advisor or foreign minister, since there are not many with his experience in Lee's camp. In fact, that experience could trump the many professors who until now have played a more prominent role.

VERSHBOW